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C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 000878

SIPDIS

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TREASURY FOR JUAN ZARATE, OFAC FOR ROBERT WERNER)

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TAGS: [KTFN](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [IT](#) [EUN](#)

SUBJECT: SYRIA/LEBANON: ITALY GETS OFF THE FENCE ON
HEZBOLLAH DESIGNATION, SAYS "TRUST US" ON SHARA'A'S VISIT
TO ROME

REF: A. STATE 44087

[B](#). STATE 44347

[C](#). ROME 197

Classified By: POL MC Tom Countryman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Italian MFA officials agreed to forward our "strong and important" message on the April 6 visit of Syrian FM Shara'a to Rome to FM Fini, who will make the decision. One official argued, though, that it is in the United States' broader interest to have the meeting take place in order to make it clear to Damascus that Rome shares Washington's opposition to Syria's continued interference in Lebanon. Meanwhile, Italy, supported by a growing number of EU partners, actively pushed for a Hezbollah designation at the 15 March EU Clearing House. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Pol MC and Poloff delivered Ref A and B demarches to Luca Ferrari, the head of the MFA's Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, and Giorgia de Parolis, desk officer for Syria, on March 14. Ferrari promised that Italy would give the "utmost consideration" to our "strong and important" message but that it was up to FM Fini (and PM Berlusconi) to make the decision on whether to cancel FM Shara'a's April 6 visit to Rome. Ferrari said the visit had been in the works since February and had already been rescheduled once when Shara'a had to cancel. Italy took the February 14 assassination of former PM Hariri into consideration but decided to go forward with the visit so that it could send the Syrians a strong message. In the end, Ferrari said, the pros of being able to pressure the Syrian regime directly and show Damascus that Rome is just as serious about this issue as the Washington outweighed concerns that the Syrians would misrepresent the visit or that it would send the wrong message.

"Trust Us"

[1](#)3. (C) Ferrari argued that Italy has a stronger position than its EU partners vis-a-vis Syria. FM Fini issued a statement before his January visit to Damascus (Ref C) in which he called Hezbollah a terrorist organization in order to make Italy's position clear to the Syrians. Italy was the only country to include the disarmament of Hezbollah -- in addition to Syrian withdrawal -- in its declaration on Lebanon. Commenting that the French are weakening on the withdrawal issue, Ferrari said that Italy does not want to leave this issue in the hands of Paris and instead believes it can play a valuable role.

[1](#)4. (C) Ferrari further argued that, because of Italy's special advantage of being close to both Israel and the Palestinians and thus "embedded" in the Peace Process, because Italy has a direct interest in the stability of the Eastern Mediterranean, and because Italy is one of the best friends of the US, especially on Middle East issues, Italy can help promote the message that the US and Europe are serious and united on this issue.

[1](#)5. (C) Italy's goal, he continued, is to help the Syrians understand that Hezbollah will eventually be disarmed, either voluntarily, by integration with the national military, or by force, and that it is in their own interests to take a long-term view and stay in the game rather than be isolated. The Italians will stress that President Bush is serious about peace in the Middle East, and that Syria's time will come, but it needs to help create the conditions for that peace by acting responsibly.

6.(C) Finally, Ferrari said that Washington needs to understand that this is a new Italy, with a new Foreign Minister, and a new foreign policy, willing to back US Middle East policies. Italy has maintained its troops in Iraq despite significant domestic opposition and recent uproar over the Calipari case, for example. The US, he said, has two main partners on Middle East issues in Europe, the UK and

Italy, and should allow Italy some autonomy. If the Italian

government can demonstrate to its own public that the US values Rome's role in the Middle East, Italy can be an even more effective partner.

Leading the Charge in the EU on Hezbollah

17. (C) On Hezbollah, Ferrari noted that Italy had been isolated during the expert-level drafting of the conclusions for the March 16 GAERC in Brussels when it insisted that they refer not only to Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, but also to UNSCR 1559's other requirement: the disarmament of the militias. The most the Italians were able to get from their colleagues was a demand for implementation of 1559 "in its entirety."

18. (C) MFA PolDir Terzi phoned Pol MC March 15 to say that Italy had been strongly supportive of the designation of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization at the just-concluded meeting of the EU Clearing House. Terzi said that the opposition to designation had shrunk to the usual two suspects (France and an unnamed other) and a new opponent, surprisingly, Poland. (Comment. This is a significant change in the Italian position, from one of passive sympathy for the US position to actively supporting an EU designation. End comment.)

19. (C) Pol M/C also delivered Ref A and B demarches to Alain Economides, Deputy Chief of Staff in FM's office. Economides commented that it would not be easy to cancel or postpone the meeting at such a late stage and noting that "talking to people can be useful," said he would pass the message to Fini. Econoff delivered Ref B demarche to Giampaolo Cantini, MFA Office Director for G8 and Global Issues.

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